

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Larry: My name is Larry Crummer. I just had my 81st birthday yesterday. We're in the library at the Wyoming Pioneer Memorial Museum in Douglas, Wyoming.

Tom: I think there's a-

Speaker 3: Sorry. I can see your arm just a little bit. Can we move the chair just a little that way? Sorry. I just noticed.

Tom: Okay.

Speaker 3: There we go. Thank you.

Tom: Okay. Rolling? Okay. There's a certain date that's pasted on your brain. Can you start with the date that's pasted on my brain?

Larry: It's New Years Day, 1949. I'm home from school for Christmas vacation. I was 14 years old and our snow started on New Year's Eve, and heavens to Elizabeth did it snow. We lived in a two story house that was quite tall, and when this storm was over two days later, there was a snow drift from the very peak of the roof on that house out about 60 feet from the house where it tapered off and we were just alongside the North Platte River, and that river was already frozen over solid. That's how this whole thing started with the blizzard of '49 and from then on it was not a fun thing to have going on. Not at all. We missed school. My sister and I [00:02:00] missed school for about a week and a half before they got the road open enough that they could run a school bus for us, and then it was off and on. Sometimes it would blow it back in and we would miss another day and so on and so forth. It was a little rocky trying to get through school with that kind of a situation going on.

One of the things that's very vivid in my memory is my dad and I were out trying to clear enough road that we could get a vehicle out to where we thought the county would be plowing the county road first. The snow was so hard that we had to cut it with a spade like you were spading a garden and then throw it out of the road. While we were doing that particular job to get ourselves in a position to be able to go to town if possible, the air was always that winter, full of frost because the temperature hovered around daytime high like 25 to 30 below 0. I saw it the coldest that winter that I have ever seen it in my life. It was 48 below 0 and probably around a 10 mile an hour wind blowing. I have no idea what the chill factor was, but it had to be way, way down there.

Anyway, while we were shoveling snow I happened to look up and I turned around and told my dad, "Look up here what we have over our heads." It was a perfect rainbow with the exception of the fact that it was upside down and the points were up [00:04:00] on either side and the bow came down almost to the top of the snowdrifts. That was predicated on the fact that that air was so full of frost that it had done the same thing rain in the atmosphere will do when the rainbow's right side up. Because it was reflecting off the snow it was upside down.

Tom: Did the weather forecast predict this storm? Do you recall?

Larry: The weather forecast was rather benign to be really honest about it. The last forecast on the day before the storm started was snow in the higher elevations. Snow showers and snow flurries in the higher elevations in Wyoming. That snow flurry and shower wound up being heaven knows how much actual snow. I never did hear what they measured the snow depths. Probably there was a pretty hard trick to figure out what that was because it was all drifted. Everything was drifted. There were places that you had a little bare ground even. It had blown so hard that there was places that there was no snow, but they were few and far between and very, very narrow little tracks in there. Another thing that I remember was that we were in the house and saw vehicles out on the county road, which was probably about a quarter of a mile away. We thought, "Oh, boy. They've done something with the county road."

What it was was the military had brought in little things they called weasels and they were track vehicle and were going over the [00:06:00] top of all the snow. They didn't make much of a track in the snow even. They were light and just went right over the top of all the drifts. That was a letdown. Another thing I recall was the grocery business. The folks had put in a pretty good supply of potatoes, which was a staple of course, and we had our own meat. We had butchered and had our own meat. There were canned vegetables. I milked cows. I had at one time five cows I was milking while the aftermath of the blizzard was going on. I was milking those cows into ten quart tin pails and when I'd get done milking I'd have two pails with a little core about the size of maybe a quart ice cream round ice cream container that would be liquid and the rest of the milk would all be frozen from the sides of the bucket out to that center. That was in a pretty good barn with the warmth of cows in there with me. It was cold.

It was very, very, very cold and the cold lasted and lasted and lasted and lasted. They finally got the school buses going and our bus line had two separate vehicles for transporting kids to school because it was a very long route. In the long end of it, there were only about three kids or four that lived out that way. We had a regular school bus that was parked at our farm and then they had what would be called today a Suburban [00:08:00] that went on out and picked

the kids up to the end of the line and brought them back to that bus, then everybody transferred to that bus and went to town. Well, they couldn't get on out and pick up the kids on the other end and the driver drove the little Suburban type thing from town out to the big bus every day. We were the last ones to get on that little bus and head for town and when we first started being able to get there, which was approximately ten days after school had started after the Christmas break, the road was drifted full just before you got into Douglas and we traveled on the railroad track with that little Suburban thing.

One set of wheels between the rails and one riding the ends of the ties out on the left side along. It got us there, but your milk was pretty well stirred up by the time you got there with your lunch pail. Anyway, then they finally got things open to where we could run the big bus and we were in town in the big bus on a Friday headed for home. We got to the edge of town and the snow had drifted the road full, but there was a caterpillar with a blade on the front there that was going to take us through the worst part of that snow and head us on home. Well, it was evident pretty soon that that wasn't going to work because they would push the snow ahead of the cat as far as they could push, and then stop and push the snow off to the side. While the caterpillar would stop pushing the snow off to the side, our bus would get blown in to the point that they'd have to hook a chain on it from the cat and start it all over again.

About three of those things and they said we're not going to get you home. [00:10:00] We came back to town and the majority of the students on the bus either had family or friends or somebody to stay with in town. My sister and I had no one, so we wound up spending Friday night, Saturday, Saturday night, and Sunday, and Sunday night with the bus driver and his wife and daughter. When we got home it was Monday evening after school was out. We went to school on Monday and Monday evening we were able to get through with the school bus, however the school bus followed the road probably maybe 60% of the way and other than that it was cut across the fields and whatever where there wasn't snow deep enough where they couldn't get through.

I guess the next think I remember about the blizzard of '49 was after the snowing was over and the blowing was over, the melt started and there were placed in the county road that when we drove through with the school bus, the water came in on the steps under the folding doors and up to the second step in that bus. The watery part lasted well into March after having everything started after New Year's.

Tom: Were the roads just incredibly like gumbo and mud?

Larry: Actually we weren't too bad off that way partially because it was frozen so hard just from the moisture and then the freezing that it took a long time for the

roads to thaw all the way down. Our county roads where we could run on them [00:12:00] were pretty well graveled and where we weren't running on the roads they had picked high ridges across the fields and stuff to plow off and have the road there. Mud wasn't a big problem. Water was, but not mud. I guess that kind of winds us out to the end of the blizzard part, and then when things dried up and got back to normal there was a drought that followed believe it or not. '49 was kind of a nasty year all the way around for everybody.

There was a story went around and I'm sure it was not true, but it works very well to illustrate what the snow was like. The Air Force was dropping hay bales to livestock and they saw this old man up in the top of a very, very big snow drift digging a hole so they radioed in and one of those little vehicles that I mentioned, the weasels, went to see what he was doing and if he needed help. They asked him why he was digging a hole in the top of the snowdrift and he said last time he saw it there was a windmill down there that needed oil and he thought that was a good time to do it.

Tom: Wasn't there another story about them dropping a hay bale on an old guy with a bear skin coat on or something like that too?

Larry: I never got any first hand information on that story. I don't know if that was a real one or another one that somebody had made up to illustrate the depths of the snow. [00:14:00]

Tom: Your family had cattle then. Was it just milk cows?

Larry: Yeah. We just had milk cows.

Tom: Okay. Your family didn't experience any livestock loss then?

Larry: We didn't lose any livestock. We worked very hard to keep from losing livestock. The thirst among other things. As I said earlier we were right alongside the North Platte River and I went out on a place on the river that was froze over very, very solid and very, very deep and the snow was blowing off and chopped a basin in that ice and then took a bar and barred a hole in the bottom for the water to come up. The cows drank there. That had followed me down there thinking that they might get a drink I guess. Then that had to be opened up everyday so that the cattle could drink and then go back and they stayed in the barn. Our milk cows stayed in the barn for about two weeks before they got out to do anything except go get a drink of water.

Tom: Was there a lot of snow infiltration into the barn?

Larry: No. We had a very, very good barn and there wasn't much went into it. That was the second barn. The first barn that the cows could have normally been in had what they used to call, I can't remember what it was, but it was a plastic-y type stuff sprayed on the screen and used for windows in out buildings. It blew so hard that it broke that plastic stuff and blew snow through those windows into that barn until it was full. We had [00:16:00] already moved the cows out of there because it was drifting in around it so badly and it was a good thing we did or they would have suffocated. We had chickens and the house they were in had somewhat of a glass front and it faced the south so whenever there was sun it got the sun and we had fresh eggs all winter because of that particular building and how it was set up. We had a lot of beans, we had a lot of potatoes, we had meat, and we had eggs.

Tom: Your parents' house, was it pretty well insulated? What was it like in the house during the blizzard?

Larry: During the blizzard we had a huge wooden coal heating stove and between it and a good fire in the kitchen range we done pretty well as far as keeping warm was concerned in the house. You didn't have to sit around with a coat on. Now, the upstairs of that house you could have hung meat up there and it would have kept very well but that was closed off and the part that we actually lived in through the blizzard we kept warm without too much problem.

Tom: Were the doors drifted in the mornings when you got up?

Larry: No, it sat so that the doors that we used all the time at the back of the house blew clear instead of blowing full. I had a dog that had a very well insulated dog house except that the door was covered with two burlap bags one put inside the other to swing in and out for the dog to go in and out. [00:18:00] After the first day and night of that storm I went out and my dog could not push those bags out to get out of the house because they had filled with snow and it hadn't gone through into the house, but it had filled those bags and they probably weighed 40 pounds at least where they hung there. The dog slept in the porch for the rest of the blizzard time so we could get her in and out.

Tom: Did you have nearby neighbors that lost livestock?

Larry: We had neighbors within about a mile and a quarter, mile and a half us, but they were relatively small combination farm ranch people too and they lost some livestock, but they done a pretty good job of getting theirs into corrals and stuff so that they could keep water to them and keep them fed. The big ranchers lost terribly and especially the sheep people lost untold numbers of livestock all the way around. It was a very devastating storm to anybody that had livestock of any kind in our area.

Tom: Great.

Larry: I don't know. My wife will be up here, Mary Crummer, Elaine, before too long. She spent that time on a large ranch 45 miles north of Douglas, so she'll have things to tell you that will be more pertinent to the large groups of cattle, the herds that were bigger than my experience was.

Tom: Good. [00:20:00] You also had mentioned about digging out a train, or people digging out trains?

Larry: We had an uncle that worked for Chicago Northwestern Railroad, and his home area for maintenance on that railroad was what was known at that time as the Caryhurst area. Caryhurst was a depot and a post office on that particular section of track. They put crews from all of those areas together to dig out cuts wherever in the storm area and they had a work train set up or more than one that had cars that were set up to be able to cook food in and cars that they slept in and the whole works on that train. He was gone for days on end and they would shovel out these cuts on the railroad starting with a large shelf at the top of the drift, and then everybody would work on that. Then some of the crew would stay on that shelf and some would dig down and cut another shelf down farther and they would throw the snow for maybe another shelf down on shelf at a time up. The people then at the top would finally throw it out over the side and get it out of there.

I think he was gone from his living area probably about 10 or 12 days before he got back there.

Tom: Was this in Wyoming?

Larry: This was in [00:22:00] Converse County, Wyoming, yes. Between Glenrock and Douglas. Actually by railroad about 11 miles south of Glenrock, Wyoming. It wasn't easy for anybody, and we had a gentleman that was the foreman of an outfit about 15 miles past where we lived on south toward the mountains. He was the ranch manager for the people who owned this big ranch. Well, they got a half track bought in Denver and as soon as the railroad was able to get through they brought it to Douglas. He came in and unloaded the half track, he and a couple of other members of the working people from that ranch, and started out in the place that I mentioned that the school bus traveled on the railroad. He was going to break that snowdrift with that halftrack and he went tearing into it and buried it clear up to the bottom of the windows and they were about four days shoveling it out, so when they got it he was very cautious about where he went from there on. He didn't try the biggest drift in the territory.

Tom: Good. I'm looking over my notes here. I think we covered everything that we did last time. Anything else that you can think of?

Larry: I don't think of anything else that was very pertinent. It was a very tough time for everybody, and the farther you were from an area where there was equipment available to [00:24:00] clean roads and so forth, the harder a time you had of course. It was an awfully long siege for whoever. The farther you were from where there was equipment yards and those kinds of things the harder time you had.

Tom: Certainly you've experienced many winters in between, but nothing measured up.

Larry: Nothing that compared. We've had winters where we had big storms, but they weren't as big as that, they weren't as cold as that, and they didn't last as long. We've had deep snows that when you walk through them you were up to your waist wallowing but we've never had one where everything went together to make for a really, really, really rough winter like we did that year.

Tom: Yeah. Did you have to shovel a lot of snow yourself?

Larry: I always said that anyone who lived through the blizzard of '49, especially if they were out in the country, should never have to shovel another shovel full of snow in their lives. They had full fill of their snow shoveling for life by the time they got through that storm. I don't have a lot to add, Tom.

Tom: All right. That was terrific stuff. Thanks so much, Larry.

Larry: Well, you're certainly welcome. Good. Cut.